

Sculpting in Time

Life is riddled with tiny details, things we fortunately never consider and perhaps never notice. Think about it. Would we ever get anywhere or ever get anything done if we incessantly stopped to wonder about the inner workings of the things around us? If, with every step I took, I wondered about gravity, or the movement of my muscles and joints, time would slow to a standstill and I would probably remain motionless in the middle of the street. In order to survive, we have to choose and select. We can't wonder about everything. We simply have to ignore things.

Photography is one such tiny detail. In most cases, the role the medium plays in shaping our perception of the world is simply ignored. Photography is—still—most often merely considered a window to a reality somewhere out there beyond the camera. This is true for all of photography: from press to advertising images, from portraits to views of the landscape. Perceived aesthetic beauty stems from the reality in front of the camera, not from an artist or professional behind it. And analysis is very often limited to what is in the picture, objects that happened to be in front of the camera when somebody pushed the button, rather than the picture itself. Only rarely, when someone points out the small imperfections that distort or change the photograph's image of the world, do we become aware that photography does something more than simply channel this world to us. But most of the time this doesn't happen. We are unaware of the materiality of photography, and the medium thereby becomes so smooth and transparent that we stop wondering about the way it works.

One function of art is to reinstall wonder in our lives: to point out the details we forgot to consider, to help us appreciate the unfathomable nature of the world we inhabit, to offer us a break from ignorance. Barbara Probst's *Exposures* offer such a break, making photography visible to us as exactly that—photography.

Protagonists

The idea behind Barbara Probst's *Exposures* is as simple as it is ingenious. Multiple cameras, synchronized by radio control, depict the same subject, at the same time, from multiple angles. The word "subject" should here be understood in its broadest sense, as it is not necessarily about tangible subject matter, not about what is in the image, but rather about breaking down situations or events into several instances of the same moment. Most often, the same person, object, or place will appear in all the individual photographs that make up a work but, sometimes, one or more of the photographs will show something which, at first glance, seems unconnected to the apparently primary subject—thereby switching the focus of the viewer's attention.

Exposures range from the relatively straightforward to the complex. Exposure #65: N.Y.C., 555 8th Avenue, 26.07.08, 6:11 p.m. belongs to the simpler end of the spectrum. It consists of two black-and-white images, double portraits of two women. In the photo on the left, the woman on the right side of the photograph looks directly into the camera and, in the photo on the right, the woman on the left side looks into the other camera. The women are placed directly next to each other and the cameras are equally close together so the angular difference is not very big. While one might describe the two photographs as “portraits”—as the work does show us these faces and thereby, by subject matter, seems to act as “portraiture”—there is something important missing. A portrait normally strives to describe its subject, the sitter, not only in terms of his or her physical appearance but also in reflection of some inner psychological state. And the interest on the part of the viewer stems from an interest in the person depicted rather than in the actual portrait as a physical entity or the image as an aesthetic phenomenon. The quality of a portrait is often described in terms of the sitter’s presence to the viewer, that the viewer can all but feel the sitter. But in Exposure #65 you don’t really feel the women in the images. Their gazes are unfathomable. They don’t seem to be engaging with the viewer. They are not looking at you but rather only at the camera. If anything, the images resemble the kinds of self-depiction so often composed with mobile devices: you hold the camera out in front of you and look at it, concentrating on the device rather than on your presence in front of it. There is the same feeling of absence in these subjects and you cannot help but feel you are merely looking at a surface or that the people in the images might as well be statues or mannequin figures. At the same time, there is this sense that, if only one were to look closely enough, one might grasp these two women, get a hint of their personalities. That there are two different images of the same subject seems to suggest an added depth, an expansion of the photographic moment’s singularity that should provide more knowledge about the subject. But, wandering back and forth between the two images, it becomes clear that there is nothing but exactly that surface. Rather than learn more about the sitters themselves, the more you look at the portraits, the more you simply become aware of your own looking. Normally one would expect a photograph to say something about the world but in this case the statement is about the viewer himself, about perception.

In Exposure #65, there is only a very slight difference in angle between the two cameras and the two photos look, more or less, the same. But other works are considerably more complex. In an earlier work, entitled Exposure #9: N.Y.C., Grand Central Station, 12.18.01, 1:21 p.m., we revisit one of the two women from Exposure #65 but now in a very different setting and a very different style. Whereas in Exposure #65, the images seem to have been composed in a studio setting and everything about the look of the images reminds us of the portrait, the subject of depiction is much less clear in Exposure #9. The six images that make up the work are very different in style and character. One looks like a fashion shot, another like a photo of a movie set. One brings to mind a candid snapshot

and yet another the gaze of the surveillance camera. Four of the images are in color; two are in black and white.

An important element of the language of photography is the point of view—where the camera is located in relation to the subject—and this is also a key element in Barbara Probst's work. In the six individual images that make up Exposure #9 there are six different physical points of view, an arrangement that spatially expands the photographic moment. But because of the diversity of genres included there are also six different conceptual points of view. Not only do we see the same subject from six different angles but we also see it in six different ways. The impression of a more detailed depiction of the subject is therefore even greater and so is the sense we are able to gain a deeper understanding of the reality in front of the camera. The diversity of the images suggests there is a greater potential for reaching some sort of photographic truth. That since we are looking through so many different windows at the same thing we will get to know even more about it. And yet, the longer we look, the more this seems a dead end. The work hints at the documentation of an event, suggesting a narrative thread of cause and effect: for some reason, the woman has arrived at this place from somewhere and will continue on from here into the future. But as the viewer realizes the synchronicity of the six parts of the work—that they are individual manifestations of the same specific moment in time—and that the images, in some cases, even seem to contradict one another, confusing the viewer's standpoint, the narrative collapses. In itself, the six images of Exposure #9 are no less narrative than any other photographs. They depict one specific moment in time, by definition pointing at something that leads up to that moment and to something happening afterward. But the work's six parts do not follow a narrative structure in a cinematic sense. There is nothing in the overall composition of the work that suggests a temporal reading or that what is depicted in one image comes before what is in the next. There is no sense of causality between individual images. This might seem obvious considering the fact that they are, after all, depicting the exact same moment but, in many instances, it is exactly that sense of a narrative, temporal flow between the individual images, that Barbara Probst plays upon in some of her work. In Exposure #9, however, the individual images are quite simply individual manifestations of the same moment, connected only by the fact of that moment. The possible narrative implodes into the singular moment.

The woman who appears in Exposure #9 is the same as one of the two women in Exposure #65 and she also appears in many of Barbara Probst's other works. In fact, Probst uses a limited number of models in the works that constitute the Exposure series. This repetition is not meant to suggest that these subjects are particularly important, or interesting people whom Probst wants us to get to know and, in any case, the effect on the viewer is almost the exact opposite. The repeated use of the same model moves the attention from the specific person—

and from the specific in general—to the way photography selects and represents. Because we see the same few people again and again in very different contexts and from very different conceptual points of view, they are transformed from actual people into depersonalized models. Instead of being protagonists they become mere props.

Location

Exposure #94: N.Y.C., Washington & Watts Streets, 10.18.11, 1:02 p.m. moves us into the street. The model in the green coat is crossing through the middle of an intersection—as the title informs us, between Washington Street and Watts Street in New York. As in all the other works, the title also indicates the exact time of the exposure. Exposure #94 depicts the model from three of the four corners that make up the intersection and behind the model we see the opposite corners. In two of the three pictures, we even see the camera that takes the opposing point of view. The work gives an almost but not completely comprehensive overview of both the location where the model is walking and of how the work is produced. As only three of the four street corners corresponding to three of the four points of view are visible, the image is not “complete,” but we can infer the fourth corner, the fourth view. It is impossible to know what the house on that corner looks like but we can, nevertheless, form a mental picture of the model’s presence there in the middle of the street from the opposite corner.

I write that we can but this is, perhaps, something of an understatement. Maybe it is closer to the truth to say that we can’t not. The three images together coerce us into creating a mental representation of the space where the model is walking. Exposure #94 triggers a mental and, ultimately, fictitious three-dimensional space that has some relation to a real space but is exactly that—a fiction. Some of the same ideas are at play in Exposure #69: N.Y.C., 555 8th Avenue, 02.24.09, 6:16 p.m. Here, a group of three women, some of them familiar from earlier images, are standing together in a group in the studio. The three cameras are placed around the group and each of the women looks directly into one of them. Even though we are, again, looking at three flat images hanging next to each other on a wall, or printed next to each other on the page, the placement of the cameras inevitably causes us to form a mental picture in three dimensions. In Exposure #94, the picture is of a space—the intersection of two streets—but in Exposure #69 it is rather an object—the group of women. A fictitious sculpture of three people standing together, their gazes as unfathomable as the stony gaze of a statue. It seems that we could look at these eyes forever without ever penetrating their surface. This “portrait sculpture,” formed in our mind, is not trying to tell us anything. There is no narrative, no before or after. There is only this moment in space.

Storyline

Thus far, the works described share this non-narrative characteristic and limit themselves to depicting a singular event that takes place in a clearly delimited space. And, since the telling of stories is so closely linked to the passage of time, it might also seem paradoxical that artworks so clearly linked to and depending on the singularity of the moment could be narrative. This is nonetheless the case in *Exposure #85: N.Y.C., Broome & Crosby Streets, 01.11.11, 12:31 p.m.*

In its structure *Exposure #85* does follow some of the conventions of cinematic storytelling. The first “frame” shows an apartment block from the outside, establishing the location of events taking place in the later shots. The following images show—in varying degrees of distance—different details of the event taking place inside. But the narrative isn’t limited to the interior of the apartment. In several images, a man stands, looking out the window and, true to cinematic expectation, we follow his gaze into the street where the narrative seems to continue. Is there a connection to the woman standing there? Is she looking back up at the man in the window? And what about the woman with the green coat and the bicycle? And the man picking up the newspaper? It’s difficult to not imagine the story behind what’s depicted in the images. Earlier, Probst lured us into creating imaginary characters and spaces in our minds but here she extends this practice to the narrative and, through the meticulous depiction of a singular moment, suggests passing time. It is tempting to read *Exposure #85* as a short graphic novel, going from one image to the next and thereby following the unfolding of the story along with the passage of time. But the third from last image efficiently collapses this imaginary timeline. Here we are, for a brief moment, back in the apartment, looking at the woman on the orange couch. And she is clearly holding the same pose as in the first images—it is the same moment. If it seems a chain of events is unfolding before our eyes, in reality we are being confronted with synchronous fragments of the same event. We are given a hint of before and after but have to wander restlessly between the thirteen individual photographs, in search of something that might connect the moment in a meaningful way and suggest some kind of continuity. We try to piece together the different angles, different points of view, different elements singled out by different cameras, so as to construct a comprehensible spatial moment. But there constantly seems to be something missing. What we imagine to be a clue is merely a prop. The protagonists are not real people, the locations are not real spaces, and the storyline is not an actual trail of events.

Creating a work such as *Exposure #85* requires an immense amount of control and timing. And, if in the studio it is possible to control almost everything, when Barbara Probst moves her cameras into the real world, into the streets, her power to control the situation has its limitations. So in certain works, including *Exposure #85*, not all elements are staged or constructed. Some people in the individual images—houses, cars, and maybe even random events taking place in the periphery—are, so to speak, natural. Probst’s staging thus blends seamlessly with the “real world” to form an overall impression of reality. For everyone other

than Probst herself it is, however, impossible to identify the border between natural and staged. Looking at the work we simply cannot identify the borders between reality and fiction, a quality that only adds to the point of fascination and to the endless questioning of perception that Probst's works induce in the viewer. The chain of events happens merely inside the viewer as he tries to construct a meaning out of the disparate images.

The End

If Barbara Probst's works are about singular moments, there is a parallel and contradictory relationship between these moments and the way the viewer approaches and experiences them. Many of the works are so complex, and so physically large within the exhibition space, that it is impossible for a viewer to take them in all at once. To properly see the works, and consider every detail and connection, it is necessary to move physically back and forth between the individual images that constitute the work. The experience of the work thus becomes both temporal and spatial, mirroring and referencing some of the constituting elements of the works themselves. Apart from their internal space and time, the works trigger an external space and time that engulf the viewer at the moment of perception. Reading the works becomes a hunt for connections and details, an attempt to piece together disparate versions of the same moment into a coherent and meaningful whole. To achieve this, the viewer is forced to move physically from image to image, thereby creating the works' spatiality in his own consciousness and visualizing the spatial context that defines the moment.

In the search for meaning, the viewer incessantly meets dead ends: a portrait is not really a portrait just as a narrative is not really a narrative. It seems that there simply isn't enough meaning inside the individual images to construct a definitive truth about what is being photographically represented. In this way, Barbara Probst's Exposures reflect the way we experience the world: through endless rows of disparate fragments, each carrying potential significance and meaning but not realized, in full, until we build connections between them. And sometimes, when we can't make sense of the world, we continue looking for significant details in the spaces between fragments—just as it sometimes seems that the meaning in Barbara Probst's works lies in the spaces between the images. The works deconstruct the way we are used to understanding photography—or at least the way we are used to understanding reality through photographs. Probst forcefully deconstructs the notion of photographic truth, not by specifically questioning that photographic truth but merely by pointing out its necessary incompleteness. The photograph may tell the truth or it may deceive us. But just as in all representation, it will never tell the whole truth.

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"Barbara Probst" ed. by Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, Germany

2013

